



From Birds to Bushmen and Back

Recently, in the space of a single week, I saw three very different groups of wildlife art that crossed countries, cultures, and time.

First was a remarkable collection of watercolors on which the lithographs for John Gould's *Birds of Great Britain* were based. Sometimes described as Britain's answer to Audubon, Gould was in fact a lesser artist than his American contemporary but a better businessman. The paintings from which the plates were taken were by Gould's team of artists, one of whom rivaled Audubon in his ability to produce dramatic images of birds. Joseph Wolf, a German who escaped to England from the political upheavals in Europe in 1848, was the best of the artists Gould employed on *Birds of Great Britain*.

The five volumes of *Birds of Great Britain*, with 376 plates, cost £78.15 in 1878. Today you would probably have to pay between £30,000 (\$45,000) and £45,000 (\$67,500) for the book.

Recently, 232 of the watercolors on which the plates were based were sold at Christie's in London. They generated enormous interest and total sales of more than a million pounds (\$1,627,789). Star bid was Wolf's *Snowy Owl*, expected to sell for £10,000 (\$15,000) to £15,000 (\$22,500), but bringing twice that at £30,000 (\$45,000). Wolf's work attracted the greatest interest, and it was good to see that his *Great Bustards*, to my mind the best painting in the collection, went for £7,500, having been undervalued in the catalogue price guide at £1,500 to £2,500.

The catalogue predictions, apparently based on subjects as much as on quality of paintings, proved less accurate than at the annual bird sales. The birds of prey with which the sale

started were priced high, but even so, the eventual prices exceeded the estimates. On the other hand, the gamebirds rarely exceeded their predicted prices, and the ducks and geese attracted little interest. All these were detailed, close-up studies of the birds, very different from the quarry species in a landscape that normally sell

the paintings and prints, there were hand-woven baskets, dyed with natural materials in designs abstracted from the bush country — running ostrich, snakeskin, giraffe foreheads. Rebecca Hossack, who runs a West End gallery specializing in modern work by Australian aborigines and African Bushmen, mounted the vibrant exhibition.

The bush country of the Kalahari could hardly be more different from the lushness of the pastureland of eastern Holland, where I spent the next three days. I saw little of the landscape because most of my time was spent indoors choosing the work to go into the Artists for Nature Foundation's book on its Flight of the Cranes project [see the November/December 1994 issue of *Wildlife Art News*]. The staggering variety of styles, techniques, and mediums

took me back to bright Spanish spring mornings, the haunting calls of the cranes feeding among the oak trees in February, and the magic of winter wetlands in northern Europe.

In a brief escape from this exacting work, I slipped into the gallery next door to the ANF's headquarters on the edge of the town of Dedemsvaart. On the walls were paintings of birds by artists known to me, but there were also portraits, figure studies, landscapes, and still-lives alongside the wildlife. In this gallery wildlife art hangs beside the "real thing." Perhaps the Dutch are demonstrating that they have managed to get art, as they have managed to get so many other aspects of life, into perspective. ■

— Nicholas Hammond

Artwork courtesy of the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London.



A lively example of artwork by artist Thamae from the Bushmen exhibition at London's Barbican Centre

so well. Nevertheless, the sale must be accounted a financial success. You don't see million-pound sales of bird paintings every day over here.

On the same day that I watched the Goulds go under the hammer, I also visited an exciting exhibition of contemporary work by Bushmen from Botswana at the Barbican Centre's Concourse Gallery.

Using oils and acrylics, linocuts and screen prints, these modern artists borrow the motifs from their ancestors' cave paintings to produce vigorous new work. The paintings and prints clearly struck a chord with the concert-goers and theatre-goers at the Barbican.

The artists have been brought together by the Kuru Cultural Project in Botswana's Tsodilo Hills. In addition to